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ABSTRACT

In this paper a rationale for the use of non-participant observation in curriculum development is presented. An assessment of the University of Georgia Anthropology Curriculum Project's Race, Caste, and Prejudice (RCP) provides a case example of the use of this qualitative model in educational research. The researcher's assessment of RCP focuses on the category of classroom interactions--the sensitivity of students to material and situation, and class ethnic composition. It is concluded that information collected on interactions among pupils, teachers, materials and environment collected through qualitative research techniques renders practical and utilitarian value to educators. (SHM)

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USING NON-PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION IN CURRICULUM ASSESSMENT: A CASE EXAMPLE

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This paper was drawn from the writer's dissertation, The Impact of "Race, Caste, and Prejudice" on the Ethnic Attitudes of High School Students: A Multimethod Assessment.

Race, Caste and Prejudice materials and copies of the dissertation may be obtained from Professor Marion J. Rice at the address below:

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Rationale

Researchers in education, as Shaver and Larkins (in press) have pointed out, rely almost exclusively on the statistical model in assessing curricula. Seldom do researchers consider the use of non-participant observation, as employed by the sociologist and anthropologist, or other qualitative methods to assess curricula. It seems apparent that they regard such "soft data" as inferior.

The purpose of this paper is to present a rationale for the use of non-participant observation in curriculum assessment and to provide a case example of its use. The writer's assessment of the University of Georgia Anthropology Curriculum Project's Race, Caste, and Prejudice (RCP) provides the case example. RCP is a supplementary secondary school unit of study designed to enhance intergroup attitudes and behavior. RCP consists of a text and a student handbook which emphasizes affective student involvement. The assessment of RCP should provide both substantive insights into the implementation process of an ethnic relations curriculum and illumination of the value of using non-participant observation in probing the dynamic human interactions involved in the implementation.

Researchers should consider the use of non-participant observation as a viable tool for any kind of curricular assessment. It is particularly appropriate for use in assessing the impact of sensitive curricular areas such as ethnic relations. Non-participant observation allows the researcher to consider the situated aspects of human interactions in the flow of time and real events. The researcher is not limited to measuring static pieces of data taken before and after the intervention of a special curriculum. In the case

of an ethnic relations program, it allows the investigator to probe beneath the surface to analyze, record, and interpret the myriad subtilties and variables operating in the real classroom world. These subtilties and unanticipated variables must be considered and analyzed if the researcher is to begin to fully understand the impact of such sensitive and emotion-laden curricula.

As far back as 1947, Williams urged that some sort of systematic observation be part of any assessment of ethnic relations programs. Further, Webster (1961) and Teahan (1967) have shown recently that situationally specific characteristics have great impact on the determination of pupils' general ethnic attitudes. Yet, based upon the writer's review of over 100 books and journal articles on the subject of attitude change, only Goodman's (1954) study of prejudice in kindergarten children utilized participant or non-participant observation as part of the research methodology.

No denigration of the statistical model is implied. Rather, it is urged that researchers distinguish, at least at the theoretical level, the uses of qualitative models (non-participant observation) and quantitative models (statistical). Decisions to use either model, or both, should be based upon which model provides the best means of achieving the objectives of the research and not upon some preconceived view, prevalent among educational researchers, that qualitative or "soft data" is inherently inferior.

Cronbach (1963), Smith and Geoffrey (1968), and Shaver and Larkins (in press) have clearly articulated the inadequacy of the educational researcher's sole dependence upon the statistical model in instructional research. Further, sociologists such as Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Denzin (1970)

have skillfully and precisely delineated the use of non-participant observation in the generation of theory.

Method

The present research with RCP shares a theoretical commonality with these positions. However, this research was more concerned with gathering situationally specific data which would describe some of the dynamics involved in the process of implementing RCP in the public schools than it was with generating theory per se. However, it is possible that the substantive data yielded could be used to generate more formal propositions for testing and verification.

The researchers's assessment of RCP included the following data sources: daily non-participant observation, formal and informal teacher evaluation conferences, student interviews and personal opinion questionnaires, and a calendar record of ethnic-involving events. The sample consisted of 260 white students and 17 black students from two high schools (referred to as School A and School B) in Northeast Georgia. There were six treatment classes and six control classes in the experimental group. The data sources were used to describe socio-political conditions at the time of the study; describe school situations, including administrative and community factors; describe and interpret significant classroom interactions; describe teacher reaction to materials; and to describe student reaction to materials.

For the limited purposes of this paper, only the category of classroom interactions will be discussed. This category was considered by the researcher as the area which was potentially the most fruitful in terms of developing

conceptualizations of the curricular implementation process. Unfortunately, limitations of time and resources diminished the kind of in-depth analysis most likely to have generated the richest insights. However, several interesting and salient factors regarding the implementation of RCP, which the statistical model would not have identified, were observed.

Classroom Interactions

The first and most obvious problem this investigator saw in the classroom implementation of RCP was the expressed student difficulty with the material. Students in all six treatment classes made complaints about the readability of the material and the high ratio of new vocabulary to content. At School B this problem may have been aggravated by the extremely wide range of reading ability in one class and by the teacher's expressed acknowledgment that indeed the material was difficult. She later confided to the investigator that she felt students capitalized on this to procrastinate and slow down the pace of the program.

The affective consequences of this reading difficulty are certainly real, but nevertheless hard to document. The material was not initially well received by a number of students. As they became more familiar with the material and how to use it, it appears that their resistance lessened. This contention is supported by the observer's notes, student interviews, and teacher comments. This was true for whites and blacks. Apparently when students were given more explicit instructions on how to use the glossary contained in the student handbook, which is coordinated with the textbook, they could handle the material

more effectively, particularly with practice.

Closely related to the more pronounced initial resistance to the materials for the blacks was a kind of negative selective perception. Selective perception, as reported in the research literature (see Gustafson, 1957; Neidell, 1965; Edgar, 1966; Brzeinski, 1968), is usually a positive thing in which students of a certain ethnic group score better on subtests dealing with their minority group on both cognitive and affective items. In this instance the perception of the material by blacks had quite negative consequences. The very first day of class after a homework assignment had been given, blacks came in infuriated because they had found a quotation in the book, in a section not yet assigned, that gave a stereotypic negative impression of the blacks. The eight blacks in this first period School B class (this was the only experimental class to have more than one black student) bitterly accused the author of being prejudiced. The attempts of the teacher and several white students to convince the blacks that they were pulling something out of context and consequently distorting its meaning were not very successful.

Black resistance to RCP in this particular classroom lessened, according to the teacher. This is confirmed by the investigator's observations and interviews with blacks. However, partly because of their own reading difficulty, apart from RCP, two of the blacks transferred out of the class during the teaching of the unit. A third black transferred from this class to the all white afternoon class which was also using RCP. She explained to the teacher that she got along better with whites than blacks.

This leads into two interrelated points: sensitivity to material and situation, and class ethnic composition. Both were factors in this study.

It is clear to this investigator that blacks were more sensitive to the material, were more emotionally involved in the material, and wanted most to use it as a vehicle for starting to change their school situation.

Black sensitivity to the material is revealed in their expressed concern over the presentation of negative ethnic information no matter how it is presented or for what purpose. However, graphed and charted comparative data showing blacks with less education, less income, and poorer housing did not disturb blacks nearly as much as the written quotation berating blacks as lazy and stupid which they took out of context and erroneously attributed to the author of the text.

This sensitivity is further revealed in their emotional answers during class discussions. They were more expressive, more vocal, and more involved than whites during the study of RCP, especially in comparison with their behavior on the previous unit. In fact, during one discussion, which was completely dominated by blacks, they exhorted the white students to speak up and chided the whites for keeping their feelings to themselves. On a personal opinion questionnaire, administered after treatment asking for the school or national event since September which had the most personal significance for them, six out of eight black respondents identified an ethnic-involving event-but not one white did. In addition, black students during interviews stated that they felt the school racial situation was bad, while whites generally did not think it was.

Linked to the sensitivity concept is the situational factor of ethnic composition of the class. In the situations observed in the two schools represented in this study, no experimental class had a half-white and half-black

racial balance which Koslin (1970) feels is most crucial for successful interracial relations, at least for elementary students. Although there is no empirical evidence, it is inferred that blacks would be less sensitive to RCP in situations where they dominate or are at least in equal representation.

The trial situations suggest that when the class is all white, students speak quite openly about their racial feelings. However, the presence of one black will alter free expression of white students. For example, in School B when the one black girl transferred into the previously all white class, several whites complained to the teacher that now they could not speak honestly in class. Although this position by the students was mitigated over time, the same reaction was encountered in School A. Both experimental teachers felt that his class which had one black student was not as open as his class with no blacks. When students who had one black in their class were interviewed, they stated that they did not always say what they felt because they did not want to hurt the black student's feelings.

It seems that blacks, on the other hand, are more willing to open up when they have some colleagues. As mentioned previously, the blacks in the first period School B class were quite verbally and emotionally involved. They challenged the whites to participate. In this situation, several white girls confidentially expressed to the investigator fear of reprisal from black females if they said anything offensive. Also, all five whites interviewed in that class said they felt inhibited by the blacks. It seems that where there was just one black student many students held back statements out of respect for the black student's feelings, but that in the School B situation,

at least the girls were restrained out of a fear of some kind of reprisal from the blacks outside of class.

Turning to the teacher, an obvious factor is the relationship of a lack of anthropological background on the teaching of the material. Observation tentatively indicates several things. Most problems with the material are encountered in handling the race chapter which is heavily loaded on physical anthropology. Teacher idiosyncrasies determine the manner in which the material is presented and what segments receive emphasis. The two teachers oriented toward sociology emphasized the chapters on caste and prejudice, which were more sociological, and the one teacher with a strong personal interest in ethnology and physiology put greater stress on the race chapter. These conclusions, based upon so few teachers, are presented as merely suggestive. However, it does point up the tremendous teacher diversity likely to result when a school district adopts a particular curriculum no matter what the intended design of the curriculum developers or adopting agencies. No attempt was made to assess the effect of approach or background in terms of pupil outcomes.

Another clear problem was the failure of teachers to actively utilize both student text and handbook. Although all three teachers praised the handbook, which is more affectively involving, no systematic utilization was made of it. When activities like role-playing and simulation were used, students appeared to be inadequately familiarized with the purposes and proper use of these activities. This tended to lessen their value and impact. For example, in one purported role-playing situation, students merely read some

material to the class on the particular ethnic group they were to be portraying in the role situation. In other instances the role-playing activities were taken very lightly. It appears that more guidance to teachers, perhaps in the form of a teacher's guide, is needed so that they can better prepare students for the use of these activities.

Conclusion

This brief sketch of some of the classroom findings should be considered tentative and is obviously highly subjective. Naturally, the generalizability of the findings is severely limited - particularly if one were to pit the non-participant observation model against the criteria described by Stanley and Campbell (1966) for determining threats to external and internal validity. However, this researcher maintains, as did Smith and Geoffrey (1968), that the complex array of data sources tapped by the researcher enabled him to draw a "valid" picture of the phenomena observed. In addition, it is the kind of "valid" picture that is instructionally helpful because it has meaning for, and can be communicated to, the classroom teacher - the one who really needs to know what research on instruction and curriculum tells us.

So much research in education is so technically sophisticated as to be virtually uninterpretable to the classroom practitioner. If research is to have value to the vast majority of educators, it must be communicable. Non-participant observation is ideal for probing the intricate and involved web of interactions among pupils, teachers, materials, and environment and illuminating them in such a way as to render practical and utilitarian value to the classroom teacher.

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